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WHAT ABOUT SYRIA?

BY FREDERICK JONES BLISS

I

1914-1919

WAS it all a dream? So I ask myself in the wide, free security of my own dear Country. Were they real years, those years of indefinite apprehension, when, in very exasperation at the deadly quiet, we fairly shrieked for something to go off with a bang, even if we ourselves should be annihilated in the crash! Anything, we cried, anything but this menacing monotony. Always before us, to the West, the smiling, treacherous blue sea, changed by the blockade from a way for us to get out to a means to keep us in. Always behind us the great wall of the Lebanon, stately, beautiful, dotted with villages, flecked by sun and shade, but still a wall, shutting us in to the East. Were they real, those sights?—babies picking out and devouring on the spot the barley grains that might be found in the dung of beasts; women and children stretched rigid in the last article of death along the public square, froth at the lips, flies on the eyes, while the world, while *we*, for the very sake of preserving our sanity, had to pass by, chatting pleasantly as we passed. Were they real, those sounds?—the cries of “hungry—hungry—hungry” from which we could never escape, walk we never so fast or so far; cries pervading the city day and night, now faint, now loud, always despairing; cries from the stolid old man, from the frantic mother clutching the skeleton that was once her baby, from the bewildered little children. Was *she* real—that brave little woman, once tough and wiry, still fighting starvation with incredible energy, who dragged herself to our house, and, stabbing me with her dying eyes, said, “I have no one but God and you: don’t *you* let me die.” Yes, *she* is real to me by token of that

challenging look which still burns in my soul. For, though I tried to keep her alive, the challenge had come too late.

As may have been already gathered, our only real suffering during those long years was vicarious. To dwell on our own petty privations would be worse than irrelevant. Through the Red Cross and other philanthropic agencies, a certain alleviation in the economic situation was possible, but it was only a drop in the ocean of starvation, which reduced the population of the Lebanon, for example, by one-third, at the lowest calculation. Typhoid and typhus swelled the death-roll. It was terrible to assist consciously in carrying out the law of the Survival of the Fittest. We felt like Octavius, Antony, and Lepidus, "pricking" those whom we doomed to die by eliminating them from the list of those whom it seemed wise to help.

But starvation was not the only menace to the Syrian population which, Moslem and Christian alike, was predominantly and, at first, almost openly, in sympathy with the enemy of the Turks. It is small wonder that the authorities made every attempt, fair and foul, to suppress the all but universal sedition. Hangings became frequent. The reign of terror reached its height in the Spring of 1916, when arbitrary deportation, for no reason alleged, became widespread in Syria and Palestine. Entire families were condemned to perpetual exile to some distant part of the Empire. When the head of the family, conscious of no overt offense, would ask the Governor what crime he was supposed to be guilty of, he would receive the laconic reply, "you know." Naturally no Syrian felt safe. Men began to guard their very thoughts. The pall over the land began to lift when Djemal Pasha, the military dictator, issued a proclamation, early in May, that no further deportations of Syrians, save on documentary evidence of treason, would be made.

Our first realization of the change that had come over our relations, as foreigners, with the ruling Powers was on September 10, 1914, a full month and a half before Turkey went into the war. In the small hours of the morning the police aroused the sleeping native inhabitants, bidding them to rise and celebrate their deliverance from foreign influence and interference. For on the day previous the Committee of Union and Progress at Constantinople had struck a *coup d'état*, abolishing the Capitulations, under which all

foreigners had for centuries enjoyed extra-territorial privileges in the Turkish Empire. For us Americans this sudden stroke meant that hereafter we were held to be subject to arrest by Turkish police; to be tried in Turkish Courts, rather than by our own Consul; to have our houses searched. Arrests of Americans soon became amusingly common. The present writer was brought to the Station House on the charge of communicating with the first "enemy" aeroplane that flew over the terrified city!

Before us Americans there always loomed three possibilities: evacuation, deportation, and the danger of being "lost in the shuffle," in case our town were left to anarchy during an interval between the flight of the Turks and the entrance of the conqueror. The horrors of deportation had been brought very close to us in the persons of our British and French friends. These horrors had been faced by the able-bodied with sturdy British pluck and traditional French *sang-froid*, but the case of invalids was a different matter. Picture to yourself some gentle elderly lady in your own American town or village—some invalid, who had not left her house for months; imagine a policeman arousing her at midnight and giving her thirty-six hours to prepare to be herded into a car and carried off to some undesignated town in Mexico, simply on the ground of her nationality—only thus can you form any sort of conception of the situation in Beyrout. As a matter of fact the friends of such ladies were enabled, by prompt action in securing official medical certificate of inability for the journey, to obtain immunity. But what kind of immunity! For months nothing could render these ladies immune from the feeling of being hunted. To hear a knock at the door was agony; to wait for a knock at the door was greater agony.

With two notable exceptions the Americans were favorably treated by the Turks in Syria. The exile of the Treasurer of the Presbyterian Board of Missions, whose activities resulted in the saving of thousands of lives, and of a fellow missionary, together with their cruel imprisonment at Constantinople, involving unimaginable horrors, forms a ghastly story. The College was closed for two weeks only. Our large community was permitted to get grain and some other commodities at government prices. Entertainments and meetings, public and private, went on almost as usual.

The Prologue to our Grand Drama of deliverance was

furnished by Nature herself. On Sunday the 29th of September, 1918, we were shaken by an earthquake, which seemed to last a full minute and which was quite different in quality from any that I have ever experienced. It was as if a super-Titanic Dog had taken the world by the scruff of its neck and was shaking it with violent rapidity from side to side. "Wake up!" it was probably saying, "you know nothing about it, but Allenby is near!" On that Sunday—the earthquake had nothing to do with it!—the President of the American College called on the Turkish Governor, Ismail Hakki Bey, who declared that he anticipated no imminent danger to the city, and who rather pooh-poohed the funk into which the local Germans had fallen. About thirty hours later the Governor was fleeing by car in one direction and the German Consul in another, though of this midnight flight we knew nothing until the next day. On that memorable Tuesday, October first, we woke up to find ourselves under an Arab Government. Admirable regulations for the preservation of order terminated with this supreme stroke of ironic humor: "Whereas the Turkish Officials, with their families and the rest of the foreigners, constitute for us a trust, it is incumbent on each individual to exercise every care for their happiness and comfort." This was indeed to heap coals of fire on the head of the oppressor of yesterday, who had been the oppressor of centuries, and doubtless they were meant to burn.

The meaning of the events of the strange week succeeding this proclamation was obscure to us at the time, and obscure it remained for many months. The events, briefly, were as follows: On that Tuesday we learned that the peaceful revolution had been precipitated by a telegram from Damascus to the Mayor of the city, Omar Bey Daûk, calling upon him to declare the Arab Government and that this telegram had resulted in the collapse of Turkish authority; on Thursday great crowds assembled in the Square to welcome the British troops, whose approach was supposed to be imminent, but who did not appear; on Friday the Arab Flag was raised on the Government House, to the accompaniment of speeches by Moslems and Christians declaring complete independence of foreign control; on Saturday the continued absence of any sign of connection of the Ententists with the *status quo* quickened our apprehension as to the nature of the authority of this provisional Government, backed by no

visible force. It was a week of outer tranquillity and happiness, but the thoughtful could not but recognize potential anarchy. However, the provisional Governor, Mayor Omar Bey, inspired confidence by his ubiquitous activity and by his grasp of the situation. He, indeed, may be called the hero of that week.

On Sunday morning, October 6th, at 7:30, I was called to the upper balcony of our house overlooking the sea. From that balcony we had watched bombs dropping within a half mile of the house. From that balcony we had watched the long, slim, German submarines emerging from the deep and submerging themselves therein. From that balcony we had watched the Entente men-of-war ominously patrolling the coast. But on this beautiful Sunday morning there flitted gaily past four little warships, two flying the French flag and two the British, coming as our friends, our deliverers! That was the moment when the long-forgotten sense of security gripped us. The French captain landed. The next day seven ships were in the harbor.

The second week, thus auspiciously begun, was not without its Gilbert and Sullivan element. Under which king? was the question we asked ourselves. On Monday Shukri Pasha Ul-Ayyubi, who had come from Damascus, was formally inaugurated as Arab Governor. British sanction appeared to be indicated by the presence of two officers, though it transpired later that these English visitors from Damascus had but stumbled accidentally on this function, staged without their knowledge. On Tuesday the British army, which had been advancing along the coast, began to pour in. The telegraph office was seized. The Arab flag still floated from the Government House, where Shukri Pasha still remained. On the night of Wednesday the flag was quietly removed by the British. On Thursday a French Civil Governor was functioning in the Government House. Omar Bey was requested to continue as Mayor. The British were in full military control. Shukri Pasha, finding himself *de trop*, officially evaporated, but not without protest. And thus ingloriously terminated our ten days of Arab rule.

Some months later I found an explanation for this topsyturvy situation. From statements made to me by two of the Arab protagonists, it transpired that the citizens of Damascus had been anticipating the methods of d'Annunzio. A Committee of Four, including at least one Christian, to-

gether with the Moslems, Shukri Pasha and Emir Saïd the Algerian, sent a circular telegram in the name of the latter to the Syrian coast towns, to the Lebanon and to other places, announcing the establishment of an Arab Government and demanding that it be declared locally. It seems now quite clear that the plan of the Damascus patriots had been to forestall any disposition of the coast that might be detrimental to their chances for immediate autonomy, and that this plan collapsed when the British and French quietly took possession, calmly ignoring the *coup d'état*. Feisal, on arriving in Damascus, learned of the situation, and in so far recognized the *fait accompli* as to request this Committee to send Shukri Pasha to Beyrout to explain that the declaration of an Arab Government had preceded the arrival of the forces. Shukri, as we have seen, was installed as governor of Beyrout. Feisal, it is said, later explained his action to the British authorities as a yielding to overwhelming public opinion and in order to calm the populace.

The weeks that followed brought with them a series of resurrection-days. Friends whom we had not seen for years suddenly appeared, having sped from Jerusalem by motor. Very slowly and very irregularly letters began to drift in—some of them almost three years old. Once more we read newspapers written in English. British officers and privates gave us details of their great campaign. Indeed the story was told to us by General Allenby himself, who made a special visit to Beyrout to address our students of the American College. The stagnant life of the city was vivified by new elements: British and French uniforms, Algerians and Indians, Armenian volunteers, the Egyptian labor-corps, camel-corps from the Desert. Motor-lorries dashed through the streets in endless procession. Thousands of tents were scattered through the pine-groves and along the sea-shore. A British military band gave concerts in the public square. Once more signs in other languages than Turkish appeared over the places of business. Second only to the thrill I felt at the sight of the ships on that Sunday morning was the emotion evoked by the appearance of the long-suppressed sign, "Thomas Cook & Son"! Even thus may the commonplace have a high symbolic meaning. In a word, new life began to pulsate within our bodies and within our souls, though the latter still bore scars that will remain to our dying day.

II.

1920.

Over against the uncertainties which cloud the future of Syria and Palestine, two affirmations may be made with considerable confidence: first, the Turks have gone for good; second, the people will remain determined that no temporary occupation, mandate or coöperation on the part of foreigners shall imperil or prejudice their unity and their independence. These ideas have steadily increased and solidified since they were announced early last summer as the programme of the Emir Feisal whom the All-Syrian Congress elected King of Syria in March. Feisal is one of the now prominent figures unknown to the world before the war. In 1915 the British, acting through that "Scholar-Gipsy," Colonel Lawrence, gained the coöperation of his father, Hussein, the Sherif of Mecca, a descendant of Mohammed, by promising him help in his ambition to create an Arab Empire extending from the border of Egypt to the Persian Gulf. So, at least, the arrangement was absolutely understood by Hussein (now King of the Hejaz) and by Feisal, his third son. Feisal, who is about thirty-five years old, has had no European training, but was educated at Constantinople, where he resided between the ages of seven and twenty-four. This residence gave him an outlook on life not afforded by Arabia, but it did not change his essential Arab nature. Controlling as he did the Bedawin on the fringe of Syria and Palestine, he rendered invaluable service in Allenby's brilliant campaign, culminating in the entry to Damascus on September 30, 1918. Let me say in passing that my intimacy with Feisal, in matters both of public and private concern, has produced in my heart and mind a confidence in his ability, wisdom, patriotism and integrity.

Feisal has played the game squarely and openly. He believes, and I think rightly, that he has the majority of the inhabitants of Syria and Palestine behind him. He has, in London and Paris, patiently persisted in his attempts to get the British and French to stick by their pronouncements, by which the Syrians are to determine their ultimate form of government, and are to have an important voice in the choice of their advisers. These declarations are plain. In the *Palestine News* for November, 1918—the official

journal of the Egyptian Expeditionary Force under General Allenby—was published “the text of declaration agreed to between the British and French Governments and communicated to the President of the United States.” Here, *inter alia*, we read:

The aim which France and Great Britain have in view in waging in the East the war let loose on the world by German ambition, is to ensure the complete and final emancipation of all those peoples so long oppressed by the Turks, and to establish national governments and administrations which shall derive their authority from the initiative and free will of the peoples themselves.

This declaration was published (in translation) in the Arabic and French press of Beyrout.

The twenty-second section of the League of Nations Covenant, under which England and France are even now supposed to be working, directly implies that such lands as Syria and Palestine “have reached a state of development where their existence as independent nations can be provisionally recognized,” adding that “the wishes of these communities must be a principal consideration in the selection of the Mandatory Power.” These official declarations theoretically render null and void the provisions of the secret treaty, negotiated in 1916 between the late Sir Mark Sykes and Monsieur Georges Picot, by which, among other matters considered, France is recognized as the practical master of Syria; and England, of Palestine. I have it on first hand authority that Sir Mark confessed as much before his death. But theory is one thing and practical politics is, alas!, another. A prominent French ecclesiastic indignantly declared to me that to set aside the Sykes-Picot Treaty would be another case of “a scrap of paper”!

During the winter and spring of 1919, disinterested friends of Syria and Palestine strove hard to secure the appointment in Paris of a mixed Allied Commission, which should seek to find out the wishes of the Syrians in their own land. France objected to taking part in this Commission, probably foreseeing that a plebiscite would go against herself for a Mandatory Power. Great Britain felt she could not send representatives if France did not. Wisely or unwisely—I think wisely—the American members, Messrs. Crane and King, proceeded alone, landing at Jaffa in June and remaining in the country some five weeks. As it was my privilege to follow their methods at close range, I can

testify to their thoroughness, caution and impartiality. No publicity has been given to their report. I understand that apparently six-sevenths of the population expressed a wish for independence, immediate and complete. Failing this, they chose America as the Mandatory Power, with England as second choice. The remaining seventh included the solid block of Maronites, mainly inhabiting the northern part of the Lebanon, but also scattered in the southern part and in the coast towns. They are very numerous in Beyrout. With these in the demand for France are associated other bodies affiliated with the Roman Catholic Church.

But, as I have repeatedly told Feisal's followers, passionately determined on an American Mandate, it is one thing to feel that you can't get along without a girl, and it is quite another to insist that she marry you. America shows no disposition to take over the administration of Syria. England, for a year after the Occupation, kept the military control of both Syria and Palestine, but confined her civil administration to the latter. In December 1919 she withdrew her forces from Syria, where today France controls the seaboard with its hinterland both in a military and a civil sense; and Feisal, subject to France's nebulous oversight, is responsible for the interior, with Damascus as headquarters.

It was probably Feisal's recognition of the inevitable connection which France is apparently destined to have with Syria that precipitated his acceptance of the crown. Was it perhaps a checkmate to possible plans of aggression? Little reliance can be placed on the daily and newspaper dispatches regarding the Near East, and on the local correspondence, but the following alleged quotations from his speeches appear to show the trend of his ideas: "Both England and America refuse to help us." "It is to France that we would turn." "France can ask anything but one thing—to compromise our independence, which is unthinkable."

How Feisal can reconcile an acceptance of French superintendence in Northern Syria with his fundamental idea of a unity of control extending over Greater Syria, it is not easy to see. The hope of the Nationalists was for one mandate over Syria and Palestine. It is hard to conceive how the French would be allowed a mandate over Palestine, even if they wanted it. Their interest has always been in the Greater Lebanon. When I say that this interest is fundamentally sentimental, the word is not used in any deroga-

tory sense. This sentiment of friendship is cordially reciprocated. The roots thereof strike deep into history.

If France is to continue coöperation in the civil administration of Northern Syria, it is profoundly to be hoped that this administration will improve. At present it is not as efficient as the one it replaced. For most of the war-period the Beyrout *vilayet* was ruled by Azmi Bey, formerly Prefect of Police at Constantinople. Without for a moment extenuating his cruel and unscrupulous methods, one may maintain that this strong administrator was methodic, industrious, firm, enterprising, demanding similar qualities from his subordinates. Current reports from Beyrout picture appalling conditions: trade is stagnant, the Custom House is disorganized, the police are described as "a mere name," the Lebanon which I remember as being as safe as the New England of my childhood has become the scene of brigandage. These conditions are partly due to the paralyzing uncertainties of the situation. Will they improve when the relations between the Syrians and the French are definitely fixed? I, for one, see grounds for hope, when distrust and suspicion are replaced by clearly defined coöperation.

Whatever arrangements may be made for future foreign assistance in the administration and development of Palestine proper, it is clear that Feisal expects his sovereignty to extend over that land. But this opens up questions touching Zionism, which is another story, too long to be included here.

FREDERICK JONES BLISS.